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ABSTRACT

This paper, addressed to administrators and school board members, lists 10 suggestions for developing a public relations program that releases to the community more of the good news about schools. The suggestions include the following: (1) emphasize face-to-face communications with members of the community, (2) make sure good and bad news about the school is easily available to the media, (3) set up an internal communications network that includes newsletters and use of public service announcements, (4) assign a top-level administrator to the district's public relations program, (5) provide adequate funds for public relations, (6) get feedback from staff and important public groups, (7) adopt a written policy statement on public relations, (8) encourage use of school buildings by the community, (9) provide public relations inservice training for staff, and (10) make the schools good enough to generate good news. (Author/LD)

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WHERE HAS ALL THE GOOD NEWS GONE?

Presentation by Dr. John H. Wherry, Executive Director
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Arlington, Virginia

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL DISTRICT PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMS C-32
NSBA Convention - 4:30 p.m., Sunday, April 22, 1979

As we discuss the subject "Successful School District Public Relations Programs" today, I would like to focus for a few minutes on the statement describing the theme of the Clinic as it appears in your program: "Whatever happened to the good news about schools? Here's how to tell it successfully."

We all know we don't have to look very hard today to find bad news about education. Nearly any newspaper, radio or television broadcast will do.

The frustrating fact is, that you know and I know that there are lots of good things going on day after day in our schools, despite all the information to the contrary which we are bombarded with every day:

- We know that despite our warts and moles and scars, the fact is that our schools are still doing the best job in history.

- Statistics clearly show that U.S. adults are the most highly educated in the world.

- We can point out that a higher percentage of students are attending school regularly than ever before.

- We know that more U.S. students finish secondary school than in any other country.

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- We know from personal experience that Alice Stafford is one of the most gifted and dedicated human beings that ever taught kindergarten. And you can give me more names right now.

- And, we know that there are darned few math programs that can beat the one in our local high school -- or perhaps it is the science or language arts, or reading or career education program in your community.

It's not that we aren't aware of education's faults. We know them painfully well. And we know that we must exercise our educational leadership individually and collectively to improve educational performance. As good as our schools are, we know that we could do better in virtually every area. And, you and I know that we are working at it. Hard.

Why is it then, that everybody doesn't love us? Why is it that they can't see that we are good people doing our best -- and doing a pretty good job at that? Where has all the good news gone?

Fortunately, there is a lot of good news around and there are some very straightforward things we can do to bring the whole picture into proper perspective. In these few minutes, let me list ten concrete things that each of us as school board members and school administrators can do:

1. We can decide whether we want more positive news or more positive public attitudes. The two do not necessarily go together. Good news does not guarantee good attitudes or bad news, bad attitudes. That's a surprising fact, but there is abundant research to show that it's true. In essence,

research says that the mass media (radio, TV, newspapers) are unsurpassed for providing information, and that they basically serve to reinforce pre-existing attitudes.

But, listen to this. This is where the research really gets interesting. If people simply receive information through the mass media, the positive or negative attitudes they already had become a little stronger. But when they begin to discuss the information they have received with members of their family, their friends, their acquaintances, then it is quite likely that their attitudes may change.

Putting it another way, research tells us that the mass media is best used to provide information, and we've got a lot of information to provide. The mass media is also very powerful in strengthening attitudes the public already has. The majority of the people in most communities rather strongly support their local schools, and the mass media can provide invaluable assistance in maintaining those positive attitudes. But, we misunderstand if we think the media causes people to have the opinions they do. Research says that it is interpersonal communication, face-to-face contact with other people we respect, that is the most powerful means of forming or changing the attitudes we have. (Example showing how different people reading the same article can develop totally opposite opinions.)

I'm not trying to downplay the importance of the mass media at all. I simply want us to understand what it does and how we can use it most effectively. I believe most of us would agree that we want to both increase the amount of good news about schools in the mass media, and improve public attitudes

about schools too. It is very clear, however, that if the bulk of the information provided about schools is highly negative, it is pretty hard for the public to develop positive attitudes based on that information as they form opinions with their friends.

2. We can learn how to provide balanced news to the media. I am certain that none of us are interested in "controlling" the news to insure that only positive things about schools appear. We all know how important the free press is to our way of life. Instead, what I think we are asking is for a fair shake. We want the public to have balanced information. And we can learn how to provide that.

Do you know how easy it is for the media to get the bad news? Have you ever visited a newspaper, radio or television news room? If you have, you know that it is chaotic. Pressure to meet deadlines is intense. Phones are ringing, teletypes clatter, there are piles of mail everywhere, and shortwave radios blare as they automatically and continuously scan the police department, fire department, sheriff's department and highway patrol channels for immediate notice of problems as they happen. Daily newspapers often print only about one-tenth of the material available to them on any given day. Radio and television use much less than that.

Now, tell me -- when was the last time something positive about your schools was broadcast over the police radio. Today is Associated Press or United Press International carrying a story about that excellent kindergarten

teacher or the high school math program you are so proud of? Is there a news release in that big stack on the editor's desk about the inflationary costs you are facing for chalk and scissors and paste and cleaning supplies, or textbooks? Is one of the telephones ringing, a school person with a news item?

My whole point is that we cannot reasonably expect that the news media will always come to us seeking out school news. They usually have more than enough material to work with, without any school news. Negative news is regularly available to the media without their having to lift a finger or move off their chair. And reporters are human just like we are. It's much easier to use negative news, because it is so easy to get!

The whole secret to balanced school news is for us to make information easily available. It's easy for us to do a quick overview of good story possibilities, outline four or five on a single sheet, duplicate it on colored paper, so it's easy to find in the editor's stack of paper, and send it along to the media. That's called "a tip sheet." Those same ideas can be telephoned in. Someone can stop by the editor's desk in person once in a while. Brief news releases are effective. Often reporters will visit a school if invited, and certainly all media should receive school publications.

We can make sure the media receives a balanced diet of school news, and we must make it easily available to them.

3. We can stop relying so heavily on the traditional news media and set up communication channels of our own. There are at least two sides to every story, and we can make sure that our side is told. We must not default

on our obligation to communicate with the public by expecting the news media to do our job. The responsibility of the news media is a very general one to keep the public informed on important news of the day. They have no obligation to build support for our schools. They are not required to tell parents about upcoming parent/teacher conferences, or to keep our staff members informed of board positions during negotiations. They are really not interested in filling their limited space with details of every subject we think the public should be informed about whether they want to be or not.

So, we must set up our own channels. We can start staff newsletters, community newsletters, school building newsletters. We can make use of free radio and television public service announcements. The National School Public Relations Association is now arranging for public service spots supporting American education to run during the radio and TV broadcasts of National Football League games next season. We can identify informal networks of opinion leaders or key communicators in our communities, and keep them well informed so they will help their friends understand our schools. Even activity signboards outside many schools can be used for more than just telling the date of the next game. Lots of people drive by our schools every day, and what if those signs were changed several times each week with messages like "6th graders are writing paragraphs," "3rd grade is studying fractions," or "seniors are studying jobs at area businesses." The opportunities are great, and the news media cannot, and will not do it all.

4. <u>We can see that someone, some top level administrator, is assigned responsibility for managing the district's public relations program</u>. The most basic

responsibility board members share with their administrative staff is that of serving the best interest of the public they represent by providing the best possible education system with the public resources that are available. Strong communication is essential in fulfilling that responsibility. With the many messages and communication media competing for the attention of the public today, it is absolutely essential that someone be responsible for setting up and maintaining the communication system schools must have. I think it's best to hire a trained communication professional to work full-time or part-time on the job. But even if that's impossible, someone must be given the responsibility. The public will no longer tolerate even any hints that public officials are hiding behind one excuse or another, including lack of money, in order to avoid providing them with reasonable information about their schools.

5. We can provide adequate funds for a good public relations program. The old lament about "You should see our budget....There's just no way"" isn't convincing. Extensive communication activity takes place day after day in our schools whether we realize it or not. Careful analysis shows that virtually every school employee from cooks and bus drivers to librarians, secretaries, teachers and administrators already spend a significant part of their time communicating with the public. These communications and personal contacts during working hours as well as on their own time in the community, exert untold influence in determining public attitudes about our schools. If it were possible to compute the percentage of each employee's time spent on communication and multiply that by their annual salaries, we would find out how much the school district is already investing in communications. Then

the question very clearly becomes not can we afford it, but are we getting our money's worth? A very small investment for salary and materials can make sure our communications program is well managed.

6. We can insist on the development of two-way channels of communication with our staff and important groups among the general public. We can't tell if our message is getting through unless we provide for regular feedback. Sometimes even though we think we are doing a good job communicating because we have newsletters and regular coverage in the news media, we still find that we are frustrated. Usually, that's because we haven't provided for feedback. Let me demonstrate the frustration. (stand up, turn around, shake hands exercise) Through a well-managed public relations program we can distribute evaluation questionnaires at every school activity involving parents or the public. We can set up information booths at shopping centers at the beginning of the school year. We can provide telephone hotlines to receive and answer questions. We can conduct community surveys, and we can see that board members and administrators have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with key groups throughout the community.

7. We can adopt a written policy statement on public relations. Policy is the responsibility of the board. Policy is the foundation for every program and activity in our schools. We have found in our work with schools throughout the country, that a written, visible board commitment to providing factual, honest, accurate information to the public receives strong community support.

8. We can be sure that our school district public relations and communications efforts are focused on the school building unit. The entire school system is represented by each individual school building in the community it serves. It is there where most people, parents and others alike, have most of their personal contacts with our schools. That is where the face-to-face, interpersonal, attitude forming contacts take place. We can encourage school building newsletters, opportunities for the community to visit the schools in action, use of available space in each school by senior citizens, volunteers and other community groups. School building units that are seen as good citizens in the community invariably develop strong community support and highly positive attitudes about the entire school system.

9. We can provide public relations and communications in-service training activities for all staff members. We know that every staff member is important, but we often give them little guidance in what to do. Programs should be included for everyone in our staff development planning. (Possible use of bus driver example from David Van Dyck, New York School Boards Association.)

10. We can remember, above all, that good news and good public attitudes are based on good actions by our schools. That is the heart of public relations. Public relations has been called the practice of social responsibility. And that is the most basic obligation of school board members. Board members are responsible for seeing that the schools serve the best interests of the public. There is simply no way to make people think that their schools are better than they are. It's not just dishonest, it's not possible.

SUMMARY

Reviewing what I have said, the basic message is that a well thought-out, intelligent public relations program is the answer to increasing good news about our schools and to earning better public attitudes as well. We must first make sure that our schools are doing a good job, and then we've got to use every communication channel at hand, including radio, television and newspapers, to make sure that people know it.

One final word for those of you who would still like to have some good ammunition to combat those occasional negative newspaper stories including those that sometimes involve you personally. Let me offer you this bit of wisdom passed along to me by Professor Robert C. Shaw at the University of Missouri. The author is unknown:

DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE STORY

Throw Away Yesterday's Newspaper

Don't worry about the story --

Some people can't read.

Some people who can read, didn't read the paper yesterday.

Some people who read the paper yesterday, didn't see the article.

Some people who saw the article, didn't really care about it.

Some people who care about the article, don't know you personally.

Some who know you, didn't believe the article.

Those who believe it, weren't your friends anyway.

So -- the hell with it.

Thank you very much.